

R U S S E L L S I M M O N S

Russell Simmons is the definition of a true entrepreneur. His emergence into the entertainment world was characterized by innovation, perseverance and an intuitive understanding of the public's tastes. The creative force behind Def Jam, Krush Groove, The 'Noy, Oneworld Music Beat, Rush Media, Rush Artist Management, Phat Farm, Def Comedy Jam, and 360hiphop.com, Russell Simmons has definitely left his mark and contributed to the history of the Hip Hop community. His contribution to popular culture does not end with music: his enthusiasm has propelled him through the worlds of film, television, magazine publishing, fashion, comedy, management, advertising and most recently, internet publication. Russell Simmons is an icon in essentially all parts of the entertainment industry. From his start in party and concert promotions and the investiture of now-legendary rappers such as LL Cool J and Fresh Prince, Simmons has come a very long way. His plate has always been full and he has not stopped eating yet. In addition to his achievements in the entertainment industry, Simmons is a humanitarian who understands the importance of community. Not only did he found The Rush Philanthropic Arts Foundation in 1995, but he also received the 1998 Maet Chandon Humanitarian Award for his involvement with inner city youth. Simmons' boundless energy combined with his innate ability to create, has allowed him to be an entertainment mogul and community activist whose inspirations come from the very people who are inspired by him.

Interview by Kendra A. Kabasele
Photos by: Jesse Walker

Vinyl: You have touched on virtually all parts of the entertainment industry- music, fashion, film, television, comedy and the internet- one might assume that you get your inspirations from each project, but let me ask you, what are your inspirations?

Russell Simmons: I think my inspirations are the people that create Hip Hop. The energy that comes from Hip Hop is the inspiration that creates, whether it's clothing or film or television, or advertising or records or fashion, all of that. I mean it's all the same, pretty much. I think that you could probably fit some rapper on the board of directors and they might be as inspired or as helpful as I am in running my board of directors. So it's really about Hip Hop. Hip Hop is my inspiration.

V: In 1994, Def Jam Recordings first release was LL Cool J's 'I Need a Beat'. What was the birth year like?

RS: Well the first year of Def Jam was like - we had Run DMC, and we had all of these bands that were developing, and doing well - but we did not have our own music company, a chance to really mark the artists in what we felt so fit. So we created our own [label] and that was gratifying in that we had put out a record and we went from production through the whole process. We had no distribution; we distributed the records ourselves, out of our trunk. It was a fun year. The most fun I think I had ever was in the creation of Def Jam's logo and all the stuff that we did

in the dorm - you know - it wasn't like we had this big company. I think the most fun and the most inspiring thing that happened to me was the chance to actually make music for a living. And that was 1979 when 'Christmas Rappin' ' came out. See, I had a record that was out, it's what I had aspired to have, and I could pay my bills and I had my own little toy apartment. That was great! That was really, probably the greatest accomplishment I had.

V: Def Jam Recordings has been sold to

needlepoint
a series of interviews with the... in the...
Seagram's Universal Music. This is not the first time Def Jam has been sold. It was first sold to CBS...

RS: Well, we made a deal with CBS years ago. It was about finding a partner and that partnership was a funding partner and a development partner. So we really resold them the same 50 percent that they owned in the beginning. Then we resold it, I guess you could accurately say it was sold again. But the first 50 percent was always owned by Sony the minute they got involved.

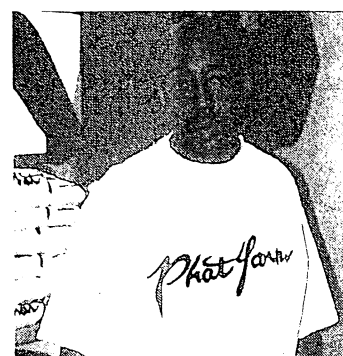
V: And then it was sold again recently. Do you foresee any buyback of it?

RS: Umm, no, but I'm in so many businesses. I like the idea of having a greater infrastructure. And the reason that we gave Sony the first 50 percent, as a funding partner, was because they had resources that we didn't have. We were really more concerned with

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developing artists' careers and images and protecting what we were doing with them; than we were in keeping all the money. So it allowed us to make the Beastie Boys, to make LL Cool J, to make these bands greater than they would have been, in other circumstances. That's why we did it. The second half, it sort of allows even greater range, being a joint venture with a major company, so they get less priority treatment, and for me, the better I could do for my life, the better I was doing my job. So giving Seagram's full control of the financial side and giving us full control always of the creative side, has been pretty good for me because it also allows me to stop worrying about the fluctuation of the company's value up and down. Also, I like the idea of being a philanthropist; to help and develop causes, and working with things that are important. People that are important to me, or people that have worked with me for years - I like to see them get paid, and a significant amount of money. So we were able to do that when we sold the company.

Well, I don't know how long you're gonna wait before you could actually start to really give



back to the community. So the sale of the company marked a chance for me to really, really be

supportive of a bunch of initiatives that I thought were important in the community, so that was good.

Q Let's take it back to the old school, are the plans for the re-release or re-issue on CD of the Del Jam back catalogue?

A Well we did already but I think we may do again. I'm gonna put the other whole, put the records...

Q Like Chuck Stanley, and The Black Flames...

A Oh, you remember all that...

Q Davey D,...

A What about Allison Williams and Tash and... Chuck Stanley, 'Day by Day'? You like that?

Q 'Finer Things in Life', I love that.

A Oh the 'Finer Things in Life'! Yeah! It's fun, you remember that!

Q Yeah.

A Well, you know, I mean, now we have Sisc and we've got Kelly Price and it's evolved [y] it's the same thing.

The Private Party for the Launch of Phat Farm in Canada

Russell Simmons, LL Cool J, Ed Norton, and Robert DeNiro were some of the celebrities who mingled with Montreal's Who's Who at this invitation only party at Kokino's. Of course, Vinyl was there. Photos by Robin Poleon & Jesse Walker.

